It Seems Only a Step from Tahiti to Paris by the Absinthe Route

At Cercle Colonial Every Afternoon Minds of "Exiles" Float on Green Fluid Back to Boulevards.

By Lewis R. Freeman.

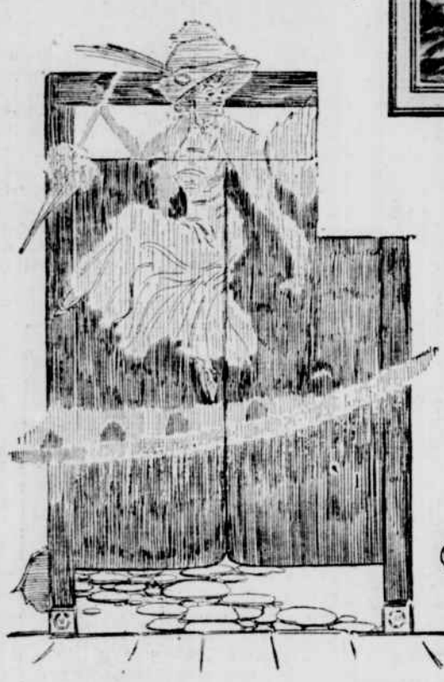
The French islands in the South Pacific perform satisfactorily the regulation duty of all the other of that republic's tropical colonies, that of furnishing a retreat for a governor, secretary, judge and three or four other high officials during such time as they may require to accumulate fortunes sufficient to permit them to return to Paris and ease for a good portion, if not all of the rest, of their lives; also for a small army of minor officials who never have a chance to accumulate and go to Paris. Many of these latter young gentlemen work—or rather sit at desks—six hours a day, drink absinthe six hours, and dream absinthe dreams the remainder of the twenty-four hours.

Besides a regiment of soldiers and a gunboat or two, it requires five hundred officials to keep Tahiti in order. Departments which in an economically run British colony could be handled by one man, with enough time over for a morning horseback ride and tennis or cricket in the evening, here are in the hands of a substantial mob. There is only one road on the island, but it takes a whole wing of Pomare's palace full of clerks to report on the condition of it. There is about one case of petty larceny and one of battery a month—but the judiciary has half a score of representatives. The total value of a twelvemonth's shipping of all the 150—more or less—French islands in the Southeastern Pacific is not equal to the annual output of a single Hawaiian sugar mill, yet the financial and commercial officials are numbered in three figures.

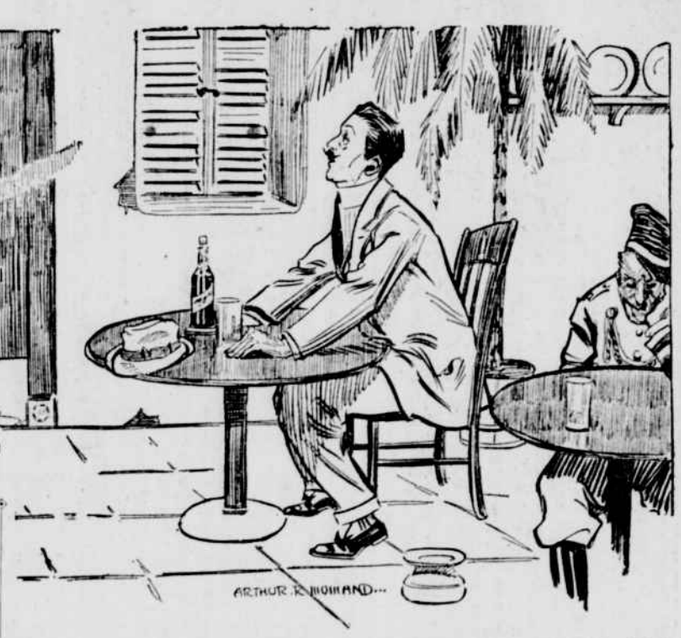
What do they all do? That would be a little difficult to find out; but try to do something yourself—to take your gun ashore with you in the Marquesas, for example—and you will begin to get an inkling. This is about the way it goes: First, a permit must be secured before you can carry it upon the dock—three officials visited. This allows you to take it to your domicile, but not to take it out again. If you would carry it down the street a port d'armes is required; which allows you, however, to fire it only in your back yard, and when that sanctum is inclosed in a metre-high stone wall—four officials visited. If you desire to fire it anywhere else a permit de chasse must be obtained—three officials visited. If you come to the conclusion that the possession of a gun in the Marquesas imposes too many burdens and decide to dispose of it, a permit to sell is required—two officials visited. And if later you regret your action and want the weapon back again, a permit to buy will have to be taken out before the deal can be consummated—three officials visited.

Six hours of work; what, then, do they do in the other eighteen hours? Oh, various things. Let us see what we can of it at the Cercle Colonial. The Cercle is a low, rambling structure of aching white, cooled by green trees, green jalousies and green drinks. You see these little French clubs in the great republic's tropical outposts which occasionally have not the green blinds; one or two may even be recalled without the rondure of green trees; but a Cercle Colonial without the green drinks—never!

"Where flaps the tricolor there flows the absinthe." I am not positive who first enunciated this great truth nor where I first heard it; sufficient that it has become a law as inflexible as that of gravity. Haul down the one, and the other will cease to flow. Stop the flow of the other, and the one will cease to flap. Certain French patriots who are strangers to the French tropics may indignantly question the truth of the latter statement; of these I would respectfully request to be cited an instance where these respective symbols of their republic are flapping and flowing independently.



PICNIC OF WHITES AND NATIVES IN THE WOODS.



HIS DULLED BRAIN CONJURES UP ENTRANCING VISIONS OF LIFE IN "GAY PAREE."

Certain of the best paid Tahitian officials straggle home to France every other year or so by Suez or America, others send intermittent messages to loved ones by the irregular post, but when all is said and done the only really well established line of communication between the island and Paris is the absinthe route.

"I'd envy these poor devils their nocturnal trips from 'hell to home,'" said a British friend of mine in Papeete, "if it wasn't for the fact that they always sail with round trip tickets. Coming out of any old kind of a dream is more or less of a shock, but coming out of the Mahometan paradise of an absinthe dream is staggering. Just about one a month of these young fellows decides that six hours is too long to wait for the inauguration of another dream, and in the pale of the dawn launches off on the journey for which no round trip tickets can be foisted on him. The suicide rate in Noumea is higher even than here, and, I am told, Saigon, Martinique and Guadaloupe are worse still."

"Fools and cowards," you say; but before judging let us watch them for a while embarking and in transit, "on the absinthe route."

Four o'clock of a January afternoon in Papeete, and the usually steady stream of the trade wind, clogged and obstructed by suffocating puffs of humid air which have rolled in since morning from the oily sea which stretches unbroken to the equator, has ceased to flow. The glaring coral streets throw back the light like rivers of molten tin; the distended blossoms of hau and hibiscus fall like plummets through the puddly air, to break and scatter like glass on striking the ground. Everything of the earth glows, everything of the air gasps, in the swimming waves of the clinging heat.

The shaded walls of the Cercle Colonial hold still a modicum of last night's coolness, and the close-drawn green blinds of the lounging room check the full onrush of the calid flood from without. The man with the gold lace on his ripped open collar, sitting in the corner toward the silent billiard room, is an officer from the barracks; he with the tanned face and the imperial in the opposite corner is the commander of the gunboat in the harbor; the youth with the opera bouffé moustache and the eyes of a roué at the table by the palm is the disgraced son of a rich Marseilles merchant, whose allowance is payable only in Papeete. Undoubtedly they all know each other, but by mutual consent have put the largest possible interval between themselves. None drink for sociability on a day like this, and on the absinthe route it is each man for himself, anyway.

The government offices across the square have just brought their short day of perfunctory work to a close, and such of the officials as have membership in the Cercle Colonial come hurrying—the first unlistless movement they have made since morning—up the blossom-strewn walk. They slip through the green spring doors like thieves in jealous efforts to shut out the furnace-like blast which pursues them into the tepid interior, and low growls of disapproval greet the man who is so thoughtless as to enter leisurely. Each goes alone to a table, and when there are no unoccupied tables left the newcomer drags his chair to a window ledge or up to the encircling wall shelf at the top of the wainscoting.

The waiters work noiselessly and expeditiously. There are no orders to take. Each man is noted by the watchful garçon as he enters, and to him is instantly brought a large glass of cracked ice and a green bottle. After that, except for occasional replenishings of the ice, he needs no attention.

Before long a change comes over the spirit of the place, a revivification like that which comes to a field of drouth-parched wild flowers at the first touch of the long-awaited raindrops. Watch it working in that yellow-skinned youth by the darkened window. Plainly a "transfer" from the prison colony at Noumea, he, with the dregs of the pernicious New Caledonian fever still clogging his blood. By the ink on his forefinger you put him down as in some kind of a departmental billet. He slipped through the door but a moment ago, and the garçon had his glass of ice and bottle ready on the window ledge almost before he was seated. He spilled the absinthe over the sides of his glass in his eagerness to fill it, and in spite of the cracked ice it must have been still far from the delectable frappé of the connoisseur when he gulped it down. A second pouring of the warm liqueur took up the remaining ice and he called for more.

But now note him as he waits for his glass to be replenished. Has a spirit hand passed across his brow and smoothed out those lines of weariness and ill-health? Perhaps not, but they are gone nevertheless, and a tinge of color is creeping into the sallow cheeks. Now he gathers his relaxed muscles and pulls his slender frame together. The thin shoulders are thrown back, the sunken chest expanded and with open mouth and distended nostrils, like a man who comes from a hot, stuffy hall into the fresh air of the open street, he takes several deep, quick breaths.

You, who know the futility of drinking anything alcoholic or narcotic in keeping cool and have only sipped your glass of lime juice and soda, can swear that the air of the place, far from growing fresher, is getting closer and hotter every moment. But don't waste your time trying to convince the young man by the window. It's cooler air to him—yes, and to every one else in the room but yourself, with your foolish lime juice and soda. See them sitting up and inhaling it all around you.

You have seen the stolid Britisher thaw out and wax friendly and sociable after his first brandy and soda or two, and perhaps you expect something of the kind is going to happen here. But no, the brandy and soda and the absinthe routes start from the same place, but their directions are diametrically opposite. The brandy and soda addictee expands externally, the absinthe drinker expands internally; the one drink strikes out, the other strikes in. The Britisher cannot forget himself until he has had a couple of brandy and sodas; with two glasses of absinthe the Frenchman only begins to realize himself. Don't look for any flow of spirits around then; these exiles are only going the absinthe route; they are off for home.

Turn your attention again to the youth by the darkened window. A fresh glass of ice is before him and he is pouring himself another drink. Ah! there is your real absinthe artist now. See with how steady a hand he pours that unvarying thread of a trickle; not faster than that must it go, not slower. See him turn the glass to the light to mark the progress of the green stain in the white body of the cracked ice. As it touches the bottom the pouring stops, the glass is twirled once or twice and then lifted to the lips and drained. Just as much water as a thread-sized trickle of warm absinthe will melt from the ice in finding its way to the bottom of the glass and back to the rim; offer it to him any other way, after those first mad gulps, and he would probably refuse to touch it. Thus absinthe á la Cercle Colonial de Papeete.

At 5:30, or thereabouts, an army officer looks at his watch, stretches himself, pours a final hasty glass and picks his hasty way to the door and out into the still stifling air. Two officers of the gunboat follow suit, and from then on until 7 o'clock dinnertime, by occasional twos and threes, but for the most part singly, a half, perhaps, of the strange company—at the call of family, military or social duties—takes its departure. The residue—unmarried officers, departmental officials and a few unclassified—is made up of the regular voyageurs (the commuters, we might call them). You will find them still in their places when you look in again after dinner.

As you saunter down to the hotel in the gathering twilight, you note that the hot, humid air body of the afternoon is cut here and there with strata of coolness which, descending from above, are creating numerous erratic little whirlwinds that dodge hither and thither at every turn. In the west hangs the remains of an ugly sulphur-and-copper sunset, in the north is an unbroken line of olive-and-coaldust clouds, and, even in your inexperience, you hardly need to note the 29.70 reading on the hotel "lanai" barometer to tell you that there is going to be wind before midnight.

Nine o'clock at the Cercle Colonial. The blinds have been opened during your absence and closed again, this time to keep out the scurrying vanguards of the rising wind. The air is cooler now, and you give the waiter a recipe for an American gin fizz, to get something which refuses to fizz and is built, apparently, on a base of bay rum. You solace yourself with the thought that you didn't come for a drink, anyway, and turn your attention to your friends of the afternoon, the voyageurs. Most of them seem to have "arrived" by now, and if they are aware at all of the relief of the cooling atmosphere it is only to tell themselves that it is good to breathe again the air of la belle France after those accursed tropics. Each sits solitary, as when you went away two hours ago, but where they were then separated by a few scant yards at the most, now they are scattered from Paris to the Riviera.

But it is plain that it is Paris with the most of them. The youth with the yellow skin is still sitting by the window, but his eyes are now fixed admiringly on a colored lithograph of a ballet dancer in its gilt frame on the wall. Maybe he is "doing" the Louvre, you think. Oh, no. Look at his eyes. That picture is flesh and blood for him. She's the headliner at Rizzi's, and she's coming down to drink with him as soon as the crowd stops those accursed encores and lets her leave the stage.

The dapper fellow with the "spike" mustaches and the lieutenant's epaulettes who sits so straight in his chair, where is he? The Champs Elysees without a doubt. Riding? No, walking. Don't you see the swagger of his shoulders and that twitching movement of the fingers is the twirling of his cane. You saw him stiffen up and twirl his mustaches as he looked your way just now. No, he didn't care a rap about impressing the Yankee visitor to Tahiti; you were a carriage or a motor car, with the latest concert hall favorite in it, pulled up against the curb.

That tall civilian there, with the gray hair at the temples and the high bred but dissipated looking face—you recognize him now as one of the highest officials on the island, who, they told you at the hotel, was "reduced" to Tahiti as punishment for his peculation while occupying an important place at home—is at Maxim's. That chair across the top of which he is gazing so intently is not as empty to him as it looks to you, and—there—didn't you see his lips move? You wonder who she is and what he is telling her.

That other civilian with the clear cut profile and the concentrated gaze of the professional man and thinker—ah, he is the learned Parisian doctor from whom the medical world has awaited for two years the announcement of the discovery of a cure for the dreaded elephantiasis. He had his goal and deathless renown in sight months ago, you have been told, when he began "seeing green," and has since, through the demoralization of his special hospital, lost most of the ground he had gained. That must be a clinic for which he is drawing those intricate diagrams on the green baize with his cigarette holder.

But what of that portly old gentleman with the benevolent face and the beaming eyes? You think he's with the others in the cafés chantant or on the boulevards. Look again. See that tender smile. He has—or has had—a wife and children and he's with them now. A look like that for a concert hall girl? No, indeed! He is in the bosom of his family.

But listen to the noise outside! The storm is sweeping in from the sea and the outer reef is roaring like an avalanche. But why no sign of excitement from the silent dreamers? Is it because they are telling themselves that it is only the roar of the traffic on the Parisian pavements? Listen to those clanging bells and the frantic choruses of yells which sound above the threshing of the trees and the grind of the surf! Only a fire in the Quartier Latin, they tell themselves, and go on with their dreams.

Now the batteries of the storm have got their ranges and the shot begins to fly. Snap! Bang! Hear those cocoanut trunks cracking, and right around the club, too. Ah! this will rouse somebody. With a heavy crash the top of a broken palm is thrown against a shuttered window and the glass and bottle of the sallow faced youth smash to pieces upon the floor. That will fetch him sure. But still no. Pouf! He has seen them "rough house it" at Rizzi's before. He beckons for the waiter to bring more ice and absinthe and turns again his eager eyes to his picture lady, where she still pirouettes through another interminable encore.

But hark again! There is a new tumult outside; this time a shrill whistling and the tramp of feet on the veranda, followed by a banging at the door. A moment more and a captain of gendarmes appears and shouts something in excited, gesticulative French. You fail to catch it and ask a waiter. Half a dozen schooners are pounding to pieces on the sea wall and the gendarmerie is impressing all the men it can lay hands on for rescue work—the "law of the beach" through all the South Pacific.

The awakening is not always so violent as this, but there is no such thing as a peaceful disembarkation at the end of the return trip by the absinthe route, whoever puts up the gangway.

Reading Clerks of Congress Must Be Trumpet Voiced Athletes

Many Vigorous Democratic Aspirants Are Already Training for the Post, and E. J. Lampson and D. E. Alward, the Republican Incumbents, Are Drilling Them in the Technique of the Job.

SOMEWHERE in the United States there are two men with powerful voices and ironclad lungs, with a knowledge of parliamentary law and an all-around acquaintance with affairs of the day, whose stars of destiny are floating slowly toward the city of Washington.

Before the next Congress, over which a Democratic Speaker will preside, is well on its way toward serious business, these two men will be installed in the most exacting posts in the American Congress—the reading clerkships of the House. It is not unlikely that the men who first step into the places that are to be vacated by the veteran Republican readers will temporarily break down under the severe strain, but before the Democratic Congress is a year old the reading clerks will be seasoned and their mettle tested.

The race for the places has already started in Washington. It is a strange contest that has been organized, right under the eyes and ears of the members of the House. There are several entries already training; more of them will appear before Congress adjourns, on March 4; and when the new Congress meets there will probably be an interesting scramble for the places.

Members of the House who had sat for years under the heavy artillery fire of E. J. Lampson and Dennis E. Alward, the Republican reading clerks, came rushing from cloakrooms and corridors the other day when a new voice, rich with Southern intonation, burst through the humdrum proceedings of the lower body of Congress. A rollcall was in progress. Usually a rollcall is a most prosaic affair—to every one but the leather-lunged, steel-throated reading clerk—and the members gossip throughout its dreary course and answer at the right time, by intuition or because the clerk looks at them.

On this eventful day, however, a new note sounded through the house; a new voice calling out names that members failed completely to recognize as their own. It brought to the realization of the Republicans the fact that the old order of things was already beginning to change, and that the Democrats, with wise foresightedness, were calling up their machinery to see that it was in good running order.

Every red-blooded Democrat in America who possesses a voice that will reach to the edge of a crowd of fifteen thousand persons at a campaign rally believes he can fill satisfactorily the most trying post in the gift of the Democratic Congress. Fortified by long experience, the leaders of Congress know that about 90 per cent of these men are mistaken in their belief, and the contest that has been started in the historic hall of the House of Representatives is to sift out the few good men and prepare them for the final trials next winter.

It is no wonder that the deep Southern voice which rolled across the House two weeks ago as the first signal of the contest played havoc with the first rollcall intrusted to its owner. Imagine being thrust into the busy proceedings of an active day in the House and forced to call with clockwork regularity and with precise attention to the answers:

"Mr. Boehne."
"Mr. Booher."
"Mr. Borland."
"Mr. Boutell."
"Mr. Bowers."
"Mr. Brantley."
"Mr. Broussard."

Or to call out at random, without a slip:

"Mr. Dickinson, of Missouri."
"Mr. Dickson, of Mississippi."
"Mr. Diekema."
"Mr. Dies."

These are actual samples taken at random from the House rollcall that thrusts itself up at the astonished and sometimes frightened candidate. What would you do with "Mr. Estopinal, Mr. Legare, Mr. Lever, Mr. Pearre, Mr. Pujo," the first time you saw their names, or even the second or third time?

Before the new candidate is a third of the way through the rollcall he is convinced that it is made up of names that he is pronouncing in a manner that their owners would never recognize, and in many cases he is right. The first advent of a tyro into the rollcall of the House is a thing for him to fear.

The two men who are supervising the contest now under way for their posts, and who at the end of this session retire from offices which they have developed to the highest point of efficiency, know what most of the candidates do not—that the places demand a physical and mental alertness and endurance exceeded by no posts in the scheme of legislative government.

A strong voice and deep lungs are not the only requisites. It is not enough even that these qualifications shall be backed up by great endurance and a quality of voice that remains strong after long strain and constant usage. There must be added to these the best of health and bodily "condition." The reading clerk must eat and sleep well; must hardly know what sickness is, and must at all times be in a condition to undergo long physical strain.

Added to this, there is the demand for keen attention to the proceedings of the House and a general knowledge that covers the whole field of public business. The reading clerk is the virtual general of the House when it is in session. He does not simply read what the Speaker or the House directs him to; he keeps the House informed as to what it should take up; has the matter at hand, and directs both the House and the Speaker in the procedure that is in order.

It is from the reading clerk's hands that the completed bills go to the enrolling clerks, and later to the Senate or the President as completed laws. There is no "check" upon the reading clerk; he must not only perform his reading duties, but must note unfailingly in the legislation before him every amendment, every thing that is stricken out and every change that may be made in the bill.

E. J. Lampson and Dennis E. Alward have presided jointly over the reading clerk's desk for fourteen years. Mr. Lampson came there when the Republican House was organized sixteen years ago, and Mr. Alward joined him two years later, after two or three candidates had been tried out in the session with Mr. Lampson and had failed to meet the demands of the office.

In their joint service these two men, the one from the Ohio Legislature and the other from the Michigan Legislature, have established a remarkable record. Through filibusters innumerable they have strained their leather lungs and kept the House machinery in motion. Both have never been ill at the same time or disabled for the physical work at the desk. In his fourteen years of work Mr. Alward has never been absent a day when the House was in session, and never more than thirty minutes away from the reading desk at any time.

"The rollcall is the hardest work of the reading clerk, when it comes with regularity," says Mr. Alward. "It is like the stroke of a blacksmith, hour after hour, with a single set of muscles."

The filibuster—that deliberate attempt to delay legislation—is always picturesque to the country at large, but it is torture to the men who have to call the roll and carry out the filibustering plans devised by the party leaders. In the filibuster led by John Sharp Williams two years ago, the reading clerks called the roll more times in six days than they had in the previous two years.

The roll is called through twice, to give absent ones a chance to answer, and then the names of members who have come in later are again called. To every answer made the clerk repeats the answer for the tally clerk, who sits beside him. It goes like this:

"Mr. Adair."
"Aye."
"Aye; Mr. Adamson."
"Aye."
"Aye; Mr. Aiken."

And so on through the list. To call the roll takes about twenty-two minutes under ordinary circumstances. It may take thirty or thirty-five minutes. In a filibuster, as soon as it is over, the filibustering leaders have the machinery all set for another, and poor reading clerk goes at it again with his blacksmith voice, which grows daily huskier, as the filibuster lengthens out.

To save their throats in these trying times, Alward and Lampson have resorted to some heroic measures. During the last Williams filibuster, the two men took turns sitting in the bathroom in the basement of the Capitol, with steaming hot cloths wrapped around their throats to keep the inflammation down.

As soon as one of them had completed a short period of work the other would relieve him, and the relieved man would hurry down to the bathroom to be swathed in bandages by the attendant, and prepared for his service a short time later. In this way the two reading clerks managed to come through the filibuster in good shape and with practically no assistance.

"My voice has been so completely used up at times," says Mr. Alward, "that I have opened my mouth and been unable to say a word. The spirit and the strength were there, but the chords I used were completely frayed out."

In one filibuster the clerks became so worn out that a hurried search was made for some big voiced man around the Capitol who could undertake the work. At the Senate end was a giant Capitol policeman who had been an auctioneer and whose voice was believed to be strong enough for at least a day's work.

He was brought into the House and thrust into the work of calling the roll. The names were strange to him, and the confusion of the House forced him to an unusual strain in order to carry out the work. Unable to save either his voice or his strength, he strained his whole being so much that the work ended in tragedy. The strain brought on an attack of apoplexy, and his death not long afterward was believed to be traceable to the unusual efforts.

Both of the present clerks had long experience in legislative work before coming to Washington, and the majority of the candidates who have appeared in the new contest have also had experience of this character.

Mr. Lampson, who is a native of Ashtabula County, Ohio, and a graduate of the University of Michigan, had been Speaker of the Ohio House in 1888 and 1889, and was declared elected Lieutenant Governor when J. B. Foraker lost his third-term fight for Governor; was nominated for the state Senate over James R. Garfield, and served both as Senator and as president pro tem. of that body. His career as Lieutenant Governor was brief, for the fight over the place resulted in his being unseated.

Mr. Alward, a native of Niles, Mich., served for several years as assistant secretary and later secretary of the Michigan Senate; and has taken an active part in campaign work. Both men have been candidates for Congress, but have experienced the bitterness of defeat. Both of them have also turned their abilities to the use of the Republican party, have stumped the country in political campaigns and have been official readers in the national conventions. It is the boast of the two men now completing their services that the House has never been delayed because of them; and that they have never made a mistake in the handling of a bill.

E. J. LAMPSON.
Reading clerk of the House for sixteen years.

DENNIS E. ALWARD.
Reading clerk of the House for fourteen years

"A reading clerk must have more than a strong, clear voice, with perfect enunciation and good staying qualities," said Mr. Lampson, the other day. "He must have a technical knowledge of grammar and punctuation, and of parliamentary practice. He must have the ability to remember faces and connect them with names, so that he can recognize the members the instant he sees them on the floor.

"The reading clerk must know the parliamentary situation at every instant and be ready to prompt the chair or the House. He must keep absolute record of every amendment, what becomes of it; what changes are made in the bill, and how the measure stands at the instant it is approved. Few voices possess the staying qualities for the job, and the owners of many good voices do not possess the other qualifications."

Of the new candidates who have appeared for the place two have already had trials before the membership of the House. Kyle B. Price, of Elba, Ala., and P. J. Haltigan, of Washington, have waded into the rollcall, and learned many things about the job, as well as exhibiting their own qualifications to the House.

WORTH HARDER.

SURELY A LINGUIST.

"Whiskey is a great talker."
"Yess—why?"
"It's familiar with so many tongues."—Toledo Blade.